

The Free Lance-Star

REGION

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PEARL HARBOR DAY 1000



COURTESY OF CARPENTER FAMILY
Bill and Mary on May 17, 1942.

All in the timing

Sailor on leave with bride
escaped tragedy below deck



Bill Carpenter was on leave from the USS Oklahoma, moored at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, when he and his new wife, Mary, heard explosions miles away. At the time of the Japanese raid, his post was center on the ship's bow. He would have faced almost certain death by drowning.

By CATY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

GETTING MARRIED didn't just change Bill Carpenter's life—it saved him from almost certain death at Pearl Harbor.

Carpenter was a young ensign aboard the battleship USS Oklahoma in December 1941. He had just returned to the Hawaiian island after two weeks of training and was scheduled for leave on Saturday, Dec. 6.

Had he had been a bachelor, he probably would have gone to Honolulu for some fun, then come back to the Oklahoma.

And, he might have been below deck the

next morning, when torpedoes ripped through the ship. Carpenter probably would have died in a watery grave, as did more than 2,300 Americans when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

But because Bill and Mary Carpenter had gotten married 10 weeks earlier, the sailor wasn't aboard that fateful morning, 59 years ago today. He'd spent the night on shore with his wife, in a small home they were renting.

By the time Bill got back to his post—two hours before he was supposed to go on guard duty—"the good ol' Okie" had capsized.

"The whole port side had been ripped

out," he recalled, sadly.

Bill Carpenter, an 84-year-old resident of Aquia Harbour in North Stafford, has wondered why his life was spared during the attack, which catapulted the United States into World War II. When he listens to other Pearl Harbor survivors, he feels "a bit strange that they were aboard, and I was not."

But Bill was merely taking a scheduled day of liberty. Being away from the ship wasn't an issue; being married was.

Bill graduated from the Naval Academy in 1940 and, at the time, young ensi-

BILL CARPENTER

MARRIAGE: 'There are many virtues of being married,' vet

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were not supposed to wed for at least two years.

Bill and Mary didn't plan to break the rules, but Bill had been with Mary longer than he'd been with Uncle Sam.

The two grew up in Indiana and went on their first date as young teenagers. They learned to do the two-step together and got engaged in 1939, when Bill was an academy junior. That was the same year Mary graduated from nursing school.

They planned their wedding for June 1942 and made all the arrangements. But when Mary visited Bill in San Francisco in September 1941, "we kind of looked at each other and said, 'It's how or never,'" Bill said.

That was a Saturday night, and Bill's ship sailed on Monday. The couple couldn't wait three days for a California marriage license, so they drove to Nevada.

They found a preacher, who squeezed in their ceremony between Sunday school and church. They had one day together, then Bill went off to his assignment in Hawaii.

He kept the marriage a secret.

Another ensign who had gotten married told a senior officer about it, and was sent packing.

A military job was a good one to have in those days, Bill said, and he didn't want to lose his.

When Mary moved to Hawaii in October 1941, she got a job at the children's hospital and lived in a small rental home in Honolulu. "Hawaii was nice then, much nicer than it is now," Mary said.

Bill joined his wife whenever he was on leave. Drills typically took him out to sea for two weeks at a time, then he'd have a day or two of liberty.

He was on such leave on Sunday, Dec. 7, when the bombs fell. He could see smoke, but thought it came from farmers burning sugarcane fields.

He heard a radio report about

"We kind of looked at each other and said, 'It's now or never.'"

Bill Carpenter

the attack and got to his ship as fast as he could. His battle station was four decks below, so he probably would have drowned there—as did the 429 men who died on the Oklahoma.

Bill and other sailors whose ships had been bombed were reassigned to other posts. Bill worked at the command center, tracking planes, until he was dispatched to

the USS San Juan in March.

Meanwhile, Mary and other civilian nurses weren't allowed to leave Hawaii. She tried to join the Army or Navy as a nurse, but neither branch would take her because she was married.

She didn't lie to the military about her marital status, but she hadn't told anyone on the hospital staff. When Mary realized she was pregnant, she knew she had to go back home to Indiana.

She finally confessed to being in the family way to her hospital supervisor, who was horrified because she thought Mary was single.

"In those days, nice girls didn't do that," Bill said.

Mary went home, and Bill spent the next four years on the San Juan, on duty in the Pacific. He advanced quickly through the ranks and was a lieutenant commander by war's end, in 1945.

Bill spent 30 years in the Navy and retired as a captain. But the events of Dec. 7, 1941—and those leading up to them—have never been far from Bill's mind.

After he left the Navy, Bill worked for a think tank based in Northern Virginia. He traveled the world, examining the actions of other countries, sharing his knowledge with travelers and investors and recommending ways to avoid war.

Today, he's still a consultant and heads north just about every day,

when he's not speaking or sailing. He tells young minds that tactics bring term results while strategy wins wars, he said.

"Pearl Harbor was a tactical move, but it was the greatest strategic mistake made," he said.

Meanwhile, Mary, now retired, continued her nursing work. She and Bill moved to North Stafford in 1972—their first of three houses in Aquia Harbour. Mary worked at Mary Washington Hospital.

She has since retired, just as busy as her husband volunteers at a homeless shelter in Dumfries and in County's Head Start. Both are active members of Ridge Baptist Church.

The Carpenters have five children, 10 grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

When Mary celebrates her wedding anniversary on Dec. 7, she doesn't have the world-changing event come after the ceremony.

Bill does. He can barely remember his wedding date without bawling. He hadn't agreed to marry September, he probably has been alive the next day.

"As I like to tell people, there are many virtues of being married," he said.